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ABSTRACT

There is a large body of well-conducted research that supports the value of freshmen orientation seminars in promoting the success of first-year students at community colleges. Orientation programs have been shown to improve retention, program completion, and the level of academic performance of these students. In addition to improving student success, these seminars also tend to provide students with education-for-life skills; promote curriculum, faculty, and institutional development; and help build campus community. A recent review of freshman-year-related conferences, textbooks, and courses revealed that orientation seminars generally address the meaning and value of the college experience; academic skills development, or learning how to learn; academic and career planning; and education-for-life skills and holistic development. In establishing such programs, research suggests that the following eight questions must be addressed: should the freshmen seminar should be offered for academic credit? how many credits should be awarded for the course? Should the course be required or offered as an elective? what should the seminar's length be? how should the course should be graded? what would be the optimal class size? should different sections of the course be offered that are tailored specifically to students with different characteristics, academic needs or educational plans? and who should teach the course? Contains 74 references. (HAA)

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Freshman Orientation Seminar at Community Colleges: A Research-Based Rationale for its Value, Content, and Delivery

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THE FRESHMAN-ORIENTATION SEMINAR AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES: A RESEARCH-BASED RATIONALE FOR ITS VALUE, CONTENT, AND DELIVERY

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The Case for the Freshman Orientation Seminar in the Community College

Despite the fact that two-year colleges were virtually non-existent prior to the turn of the century (Medsker & Tillery, 1971), they now enroll the majority of today's college freshmen (ERIC Information Bulletin, 1991; Parnell, 1986). Moreover, the proportion of future freshmen who will begin their postsecondary experience at community colleges is expected to increase due to: (a) economic factors--freshmen are increasingly citing cost as a factor in their college choice (Astin, 1994) which makes the local community college an attractive low-cost alternative for the first two years of college, and (b) demographic factors--a growing proportion of the 18-24 year-olds in the American population will be comprised of individuals from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups, who are more likely than majority students to enter college at public two-year institutions (Freund, 1988).

While community colleges are assuming increasing responsibility for the education of college freshmen, there has been a rapidly expanding body of well-conducted research which supports the value of the freshman orientation seminar for promoting the success of first-year college students, as measured by: (a) retention through the critical freshman year and return rate for the sophomore year, (b) persistence to degree or program completion, and (c) level of academic performance in college (Barefoot, 1993a; Cuseo, 1991). The positive effects of the seminar on student retention and academic achievement have been reported at both two-year and four-year institutions (Barefoot, 1993a) and for both academically well-prepared and at-risk students (Fidler, 1991; Wilkie & Kuckuck, 1989).

In fact, research suggests that participation in the freshman seminar has particularly dramatic effects on academically at-risk students, who are disproportionately represented in community colleges (Roueche & Roueche, 1993). Moreover, the proportion of at-risk students attending open-access institutions is expected to increase further because more academically qualified students, who might otherwise attend two-year institutions, are being siphoned off by four-year colleges will relax their entry requirements to offset enrollment declines precipitated by declining numbers of 18-24 year olds in the population (Cohen & Brawer, 1982; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1987). Participation of at-risk students in the freshman seminar has been found to result in significant improvement in their retention rates (Strumpf & Hunt, 1993) and elevates their academic performance to levels that are comparable to students who enter college with more qualified admission characteristics (Fidler, 1991).

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After reviewing the research on the freshman seminar in their epochal synthesis of more than 2500 studies on how college programs and experiences affect student development, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) conclude that,

> The weight of the evidence suggests that a first-semester freshman seminar . . . is positively linked with both freshman-year persistence an degree completion. This positive link persists even when academic aptitude and secondary school achievement are taken into account" (pp. 419-420).

The practical implications of this empirical relationship between freshman-seminar participation and increased student retention for community colleges is underscored by the fact that freshman-to-sophomore attrition rate at public two-year colleges is appreciably higher than at all other types of higher educational institutions (American College Testing Program, 1993). This result is not surprising, given that community colleges are open-access institutions with high numbers of students who are at-risk for attrition (e.g., academically underprepared, part-time, and commuter students). However, even after these at-risk student characteristics are controlled for statistically, community colleges still evince significantly higher rates of student attrition. As Astin (1984) reports,

> The most consistent finding--reported in almost every longitudinal study--is that the student's chances of dropping out are substantially greater at a two-year college than at a four-year college. The negative effects of attending a community college are observed even after the variables of entering student characteristics and lack of residence and work are considered (p. 302).

This finding suggests that student attrition at community colleges cannot be simply dismissed as a "student problem" that is completely beyond institutional control. Further empirical support for this conclusion is provided by research indicating that the vast majority of student attrition from college is <u>voluntary</u>, i.e., most students do not "flunk out," instead, they opt out. At community colleges, in particular, the ratio of voluntary withdrawals to academical dismissals has been found to be twice that of four-year institutions (Brigman & Stager, 1980).

The confluence of all these findings suggests that community colleges may be able to decrease student attrition and increase graduation rates significantly by means of effective retention-promoting institutional practices or programs. One institutional practice with already-documented potential for stemming the tide of student attrition at community colleges is the freshman orientation seminar (Barefoot, 1993a). Its retention-promoting potential for community colleges is highlighted by the following recommendation made in a national report issued by the American

Association of Community and Junior Colleges (AACJC), "We urge that community colleges give more attention to student retention. Every college should develop a comprehensive First Year Program with orientation for all full-time, part-time, and evening students" (Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, 1988, p. 11).

Moreover, there is empirical evidence that the freshman seminar is a cost-effective program which reaps economic benefits for those institutions which adopt it. National surveys reveal that freshman seminars operate with minimal funds (Fidler & Fidler, 1991), and revenue generated by increases in student retention (enrollment) attributable to the freshman seminar more than offset its incurred costs (Gardner, 1981; Ketkar & Bennett, 1989).

It is probably safe to say that the freshman orientation course has been the most frequently researched and empirically well-documented course in the history of American higher education because its novelty and non-traditional content has made it repeatedly necessary for the course to "prove" its value. In contrast, few people have ever dreamed of subjecting conventional courses and fields of study to such rigorous empirical investigation because they are supported by the perpetual force of academic tradition and are protected by the political power of discipline-based departments. (There are neither Ph.D.s in freshman orientation nor academic departments of student success.)

Further testimony to the value of the freshman seminar is the rising number of higher educational institutions which have incorporated this course into the curriculum. Close to 70% of all two-year and four-year colleges and universities now offer the seminar, with over half of these institutions adopting the course after 1985 (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996).

Though the primary purpose of the freshman orientation seminar has been to facilitate students' transition to and success at college, with the ultimate goal of increasing student retention and academic achievement, the course may also serve to realize a number of other important goals, all of which are consistent with the history and mission of the American community college.

1. Providing students' with <u>education-for-life</u> skills that contribute to <u>lifelong learning</u> and <u>holistic</u> development, i.e., comprehensive development of the "whole person" (cognitive, social, emotional, physical, ethical and vocational). This goal is very compatible with common themes found in the historical mission of community colleges: the development of the student as a person, rather than the mere acquisition of traditional academic knowledge (Tighe, 1977). As stated in a report of the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges (1988), "The community college, perhaps more than any other institution, is committed to lifelong learning" (p. 4).

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2. Promoting curriculum development by: (a) introducing students to the liberal arts and the academic disciplines that comprise general education; (b) providing a common curricular experience for all beginning students which can serve as a bridge to future courses and a vehicle for making meaningful connections between courses; and (c) ensuring that the curriculum is responsive to contemporary issues faced by college students.

This curricular goal is particularly relevant to the historical and contemporary mission of community colleges when viewed in light of the following developments: (a) One historical root of the community college movement was a push from university presidents to rid their institutions of general education associated during the first two years of college (Dassance, 1986), and (b) More future freshmen are expected to begin their higher educational experience at community colleges, for the aforementioned economic and demographic reasons, which should result in two-year institutions providing the general education experience for increasing numbers of college freshmen and sophomores.

3. Stimulating faculty development via instructor-training programs for teaching the freshman seminar which are designed to increase faculty awareness of: (a) institutional mission and support programs, (b) the needs and characteristics of today's diverse learners, and (c) instructional strategies that promote effective teaching and learning. These goals are consistent with the community colleges' historic focus on the learner and student-centered instruction (Cross, 1982; Doucette, 1993).

4. Fostering institutional development by: (a) enhancing enrollment management (e.g., maintaining or increasing enrollment by reducing student attrition), and (b) promoting institutional effectiveness (e.g., by increasing graduation rates and reducing time taken for degree completion; promoting effective utilization of college services and resources; and providing a vehicle for gathering entry data on students for later use in value-added assessment).

This goal is congruent with community colleges' historic orientation toward and accountability to the public, which is now being magnified by increasing public demands for higher education accountability in all types of postsecondary institutions (Ewell & Boyer, 1988; Marchese, 1991).

5. Building campus community by (a) connecting students to each other and to key student-support agents, and (b) forging partnerships between members of different divisions of the college who are involved in the training for, and teaching of the freshman seminar (e.g., between faculty from different academic disciplines; between faculty and student affairs' professionals).

This goal dovetails with the theme of a recent report issued by the AACJC on the future of American community colleges, "Building communities: A vision for a new century" (Commission on

the Future of Community Colleges, 1988). The American community college has had a history of expanding educational opportunity, rather than restricting it by admissions selectivity; a mission that focuses on student-centered teaching, rather than discipline-centered research; and a commitment to institutional responsiveness and innovation, rather than encumbrance by tradition (Dassance, 1986; Helfgot, 1986). These institutional characteristics should provide a fertile context for the birth and growth of an effective freshman seminar.

Though no single institutional program or practice can be as effective as a well coordinated, multi-faceted, college-wide effort to promote student success, there is evidence that "single-facet action approaches" can have significant impact (Lenning, Sauer, & Beal, 1980, p. 23). More than a circumscribed course or an educational band-aid, the freshman seminar represents a single-facet action approach with distinctive potential for promoting student success and, when coupled with a substantive instructor-training program, it may be capable of promoting systemic institutional change.

The objective of this manuscript is to provide a research-based foundation for the creation of an effective freshman seminar as well as a scholarship-grounded stimulus for the expansion, refinement or enhancement of freshman seminars that are already in operation. The manuscript will focus on two major aspects of the freshman seminar: (a) course content and (b) administrative delivery, each of which will be discussed in turn.

Course Content: Taxonomy of Topics & Related Objectives

A review of proceedings from previous freshman-year experience conferences, textbooks designed for freshman-orientation courses, and recent surveys conducted by the National Resource Center for the Freshman Year Experience, reveals that the following topics are most frequently addressed in freshman orientation seminars. This list is not meant to be an exhaustive review of all topics that have ever been covered under the rubric of freshman seminar; instead, it represents a synthesis and classification scheme that may be used as a heuristic for guiding decisions on the selection and prioritization of course content. A review of empirical research and scholarship supporting the value of the following course concepts for promoting college students' success is beyond the scope of this chapter, but may be found in Cuseo (1991).

1. THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE: ITS MEANING & VALUE

--Differences between High School and College (e.g., differing expectations concerning the amount of time to be committed to academic work and the quality of academic work produced; decoding or demystifying the terminology and jargon that is peculiar to higher education).

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--History and Purpose of Higher Education (e.g., appreciating the goals and positive outcomes of higher education; generating enthusiasm for higher education and interest in getting the most out of the college experience; realizing the importance of active involvement and individual effort for colleges success).

--History and Mission of the College (e.g., increasing students' knowledge of the institution's mission, college policies, procedures, and campus resources).

--General Education & Liberal Arts: Their Meaning & Value (e.g., relevance of general education for personal and professional success; understanding the epistemological and methodological differences among the disciplines that comprise the liberal arts).

--The Curriculum: course requirements and their rationale (e.g., general-education requirements, pre-major requirements, electives).

--The Co-Curriculum: Value of Campus & Community Involvement (e.g., student leadership; volunteerism).

--College Services: Key Student-Support Programs (e.g., introduction to, and effective use of the library, learning center, career center, and personal counseling services).

--College Personnel: Key Educational & Student-Support Agents
-Faculty (e.g., understanding professors' expectations and assumptions; making effective use of faculty office hours, assessing the teaching effectiveness of faculty in course evaluations)
-Academic Advisors (e.g., how to prepare for advisement sessions; when and why academic advisors should be consulted)
-Student Paraprofessionals (e.g., how to access and interact with peer tutors, and peer counselors).

2. ACADEMIC SKILL DEVELOPMENT (LEARNING HOW TO LEARN)
--Lecture Comprehension & Note-Taking
--Reading Comprehension (e.g., textbook-reading strategies)
--Study Strategies
--Learning Styles
--Strategies of Successful Learners (e.g., self-monitoring, meta-cognition, elaboration, and "deep processing")
--Information Search & Retrieval Skills: Promoting Information Literacy & Reducing Library Anxiety
--Writing Skills
--Memory-Improvement Strategies
--Test-Taking Strategies
--Critical Thinking

3. ACADEMIC & CAREER PLANNING
   --Connecting the college experience with future life plans
   --Exploring relationships between college majors and careers
   --Factors to consider when selecting a major
   --Strategies for effective career exploration and choice
   --Strategies for successful transfer to four-year colleges
   --Options for post-graduate education (e.g., graduate or professional school)
   --Strategies for improving employment prospects after graduation

4. LIFE-MANAGEMENT: EDUCATION-FOR-LIFE SKILLS AND HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

--Self-Knowledge/Awareness (e.g., self-assessment of interests and abilities)
--Self-Concept & Self-Esteem (e.g., self-insight and strength recognition exercises)
--Self-Efficacy (e.g., internal vs. external locus-of-control)
--Values Clarification (e.g., self-assessments of values and their implications for future life plans)
--Goal Setting (e.g., establishing short-term & long-term goals)
--Motivation and Self-Discipline (e.g., strategies for breaking bad habits and developing productive behavioral routines)
--Self-Management:
  -Managing Time (e.g., overcoming procrastination; setting priorities)
  -Managing Stress (e.g., identifying common college stressors and effective coping strategies)
  -Managing Money (e.g., developing consumer-wise purchasing strategies; employment opportunities on and off campus)
--Wellness (e.g., fitness, sleep habits, nutrition, eating disorders, substance use/abuse, sexually transmitted diseases)
--Interpersonal Relationships (e.g., assertiveness, appreciating diversity, friendship formation, intimacy, dating, sexual relations, sexual harassment, date rape).

What unifies all the foregoing topics and related objectives is their student-centered focus. Arguably, the freshman orientation seminar may be unique in that it is the only course in the curriculum whose content derives from, and begins with the college student, rather than with an external corpus of knowledge that reflects the academic interests of discipline-based researchers and scholars. As one student anonymously wrote in an evaluation of the freshman seminar, "This was the only course that was about me" (Cuseo, Williams, & Wu, 1990. p. 2). One freshman seminar instructor and researcher characterizes his students' experience in the freshman seminar with the expression, "We have met the content and it is us" (Rice 1992).

Another common theme that cuts across all course topics in the freshman seminar is an emphasis on the development of highly transferrable skills and competencies. In contrast, traditional

college courses focus largely on the acquisition of a circumscribed and prescribed body of knowledge; any transferable skill development which happens to occur is usually tacit or incidental to discipline-specific content coverage. It might be argued that the seminar serves a "meta-curricular" function, transcending content and traversing disciplines by focusing on the development of learning strategies and life skills that have cross-disciplinary applicability.

Furthermore, since the seminar is not tightly tied to a tradition-bound and politically-guarded academic discipline, it has the flexibility to adapt to emerging higher educational issues and contemporary student needs. It is refreshing to see how readily the seminar has been able to incorporate contemporary issues into its existing framework (e.g., diversity, critical thinking, values development, volunteerism). It seems as if a "module" approach has been adopted in freshman seminars which allows the course to add and delete topics in response to institutional priorities and the campus-specific needs of students. Consistent with this contention are national survey results on the content and form of freshman seminars, which have led its principal investigators to adopt the term, "flexible fixture," as a collective descriptor for capturing the seminar's adaptability and growing popularity (Barefoot, 1993b).

Administrative Delivery Of The Freshman Orientation Seminar

Administration of the freshman seminar entails a number of related issues and decisions. Listed below are eight key questions which much be addressed with respect to course administration, accompanied by pertinent survey data on freshman seminars nationwide and some decision-making recommendations. The recommendations are offered with the understanding that their implementation may need to be tempered by political realities peculiar to the particular campus culture in which the course is being administered.

1. Should the freshman seminar be offered for academic credit?

More than 80% of all institutions which offer the freshman orientation seminar are offering it for academic credit (Fidler & Fidler, 1991). This practice serves to elevate the status of the seminar to the same level of academic legitimacy as other college courses, and it sends a clear message to students that the course is credible, valuable, and worthy of their time and effort.

For critics who argue that the seminar is "remedial" and, therefore, not deserving of academic credit, let them be reminded that research on the freshman seminar indicates that it benefits students of all levels of academic ability (Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Keenesaw College cited in Barefoot, 1993c). Even the well-prepared student benefits from grappling with topics like the meaning and value of liberal education because such information is neither covered in high school, nor is it explicitly covered anywhere in the undergraduate curriculum. (Or in the graduate curriculum, for that matter, resulting in the cruel irony that

most college faculty are not conversant with this central goal of the undergraduate experience, including the present author, until he began teaching the topic in freshman seminar!). Also, academically well-prepared freshmen would be expected to profit from exposure to strategies for coping with college social-emotional adjustments which may otherwise interfere with their academic performance; and there are "undecided" students among the academically well-prepared who still need to sort out the complex relationships among college majors, future careers, and personal interests, aptitudes, and values.

For those who would argue that college credit should not be awarded for the freshman seminar because its course content is not "academic" or is too "applied," let them be reminded that such arguments were once leveled against science labs and modern languages when these courses were first introduced to the college curriculum (Rudolph, 1977). This suggests that higher education's definition of "academic" is neither immutable nor indisputable; rather, it may often reflect the somewhat arbitrary norms of already-established departments or the narrowly-defined preferences of academic specialists. (For an interesting discussion of the issue of what is academic or intellectual from the community college perspective, see McGrath and Spear's critique of "disciplinary savants" in The Academic Crisis of the Community College, 1991). It is interesting to note that two major topics covered in the freshman seminar: self-awareness and interpersonal relations, have been traditionally perceived as affective or non-intellectual ("touchy-feely") subjects. Yet, more recent research and theory on human cognition refers to these very same concepts as forms of human intelligence: "intrapersonal" intelligence and "interpersonal" intelligence, respectively (Gardner, 1985).

Critics should also consider that academic credit is now offered for other college courses that are patently "applied" in nature (e.g., computer programming, physical education, and cardiopulmonary resuscitation). Academic purists are sometimes inclined to assume that an educational experience is synonymous with an academic experience, but the former is a much more inclusive concept that embraces learning experiences other than those involving traditional content-centered classroom instruction. A substantive educational experience would depend as much or more on how the student works on, or engages with the subject matter than it does on what the subject matter happens to be. For example, a freshman seminar which requires a small class of students to actively reflect on, and think deeply about its subject matter via focused discussions and writing assignments would constitute a more rigorous educational experience than a superficial survey course, delivered didactically to large groups of students, who listen passively to lectures and take multiple-choice exams requiring rote recall of factual information. The latter type of learning experience is not untypical of many introductory college courses which are often designed to provide superficial coverage of multiple topics (Spear, 1984). There is

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extensive research indicating that factual material learned by college students in this fashion is soon forgotten (Blunt & Blizard, 1975; Brethower, 1977; Gustav, 1969; McLeish, 1968). Commenting on these findings in their comprehensive 20-year review of more than 2500 studies on how college affects students, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) conclude that,

> Abundant evidence suggests that much factual material is forgotten rather soon after it is presented in educational settings. Thus, . . . beyond imparting specific subject matter knowledge, claims for the enduring influence of postsecondary eduction on learning must be based . . . on cognitive competencies and skills (p. 114).

Such evidence underscores the need for the college curriculum to counterbalance its heavy dose of "information-loaded" courses with courses designed to develop students' lifelong learning skills (Cross, 1993). The freshman seminar represents such a course, one which focuses on the development of student competencies and skills that are likely to withstand the "test of time," an oft-cited criterion used to assess the true value of an educational experience. Applying this test-of-time criterion to the freshman seminar, Gordon and Grites (1984) argue eloquently for the course's credit-bearing value,

> To determine the credit value of a freshman seminar course, ask yourself to identify an undergraduate course you had that you are not using in your work today. If you can identify only one, you are very fortunate. The skills, attitudes, and knowledge learned in a freshman seminar usually outlive those learned in many other courses because they are used daily (p. 317).

It is tempting to conclude that the burden of proof now rests on the opponents of freshman seminars; let them justify the value of conventional courses with the same degree of conceptual clarity and empirical rigor as has been marshalled in defense of the freshman seminar.

However, even if these arguments make good sense to members of the two-year college community and consensus is reached that a credited freshman seminar should be offered to its students, the issue of course articulation and transfer to four-year institutions may still need to be negotiated. Four-year colleges and universities which have not adopted, considered, or even heard of the freshman orientation seminar may provide strong initial resistance to its transferability because the course is novel and may not fit neatly into any of the institution's existing departmental structures. Almost reflexively, this may activate the college's "organizational immune system," causing it to attack and reject the freshman seminar as a legitimate transferable course. (Such intense resistance to academic innovation in higher education prompted the former president of

the University of Chicago to claim caustically that, "Every advance in education is made over the dead bodies of 10,000 resisting professors.")(Robert Hutchins, quoted in Seymour, 1988).

Two criteria seem to be employed commonly, and perhaps tacitly, by four-year institutions in their decisions about accepting a course for transfer credit: (a) Is the to-be-transferred course comparable to, or does it closely match, anything already offered for credit at the four-year institution?, and (b) Does the syllabus of the to-be-transferred course suggest sufficient coverage of theoretical concepts or principles? As Shaw (1980) points out,

> The main criterion that governs faculty thinking in making distinctions between the creditable and the noncreditable is often hidden--not intentionally but because faculty by nature or conditioning have come to assume it. The criterion is abstraction. Virtually any course that yields or at least manipulates abstract concepts is virtually assured of accreditation" (pp. 33-34).

With respect to the first criterion, course comparability, it should be noted in articulation negotiations that a very common course offered at most four-year colleges, "Psychology of Adjustment," contains content that is quite comparable to topics covered in the freshman seminar (e.g., self-concept and self-esteem, motivation and goal setting, self-management, memory-improvement, and interpersonal relations).

Regarding the second criterion, theoretical emphasis, it should be noted that the content of the freshman seminar is well-grounded in scholarly research and theory on personal adjustment (e.g., mental health and social psychology), human development (e.g., adolescent and adult development), and human learning (e.g., information-processing and cognition). The seminar's content is also well grounded in higher education research and theory on college student adjustment, student development, and collegiate success. These theoretical and research underpinnings of the course should be highlighted in the course syllabus (e.g., course objectives, topic descriptions, and bibliographical references) in order to raise the consciousness of those in the four-year sector who render decisions on the seminar's transferability.

2. How many credits (academic units) should be awarded for the course?

National surveys reveal that about one-half of all colleges which offer the freshman seminar now award one-unit credit for the course, while 17.5% offer it for three or more units. At two-year institutions, only 12% offer the seminar for three or more units (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996).

It is recommended that the freshman seminar be offered for as many academic units as campus politics will accommodate, even if

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it means extending the minimum number of credits required for graduation or accreditation. Justification for this recommendation rests on the following grounds: (a) The seminar has been repeatedly found to have significant impact on student retention and academic achievement. (b) Research reviewed critically by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) indicates that orientation interventions that are longer in duration and more comprehensive in scope tend to be empirically associated with stronger direct effects on student retention. (c) More academic units for the course means more "contact time," allowing for greater breadth and depth of content coverage and skill development, as well as more "incubation time" for the development of social-emotional ties (bonding) between students and the instructor, and among students themselves.

If credit hours must be limited, then the seminar's breadth and depth may be extended via course linking, a curricular strategy pioneered by two-year colleges (Task Group on General Education, 1988) in which a group of students co-register for the same two courses during the semester. For instance, students in the freshman seminar might co-register for another course with a similar enrollment cap (e.g., a skill-development course such as English or Speech), thus allowing assignments in the freshman seminar to be coordinated with the course that is linked with the seminar. Students may then use concepts discussed in the freshman seminar as topics for writing assignments in their linked English course, or as topics for oral presentations in their linked Speech course. So, in effect, a two-unit freshman seminar is extended into a five-unit freshman seminar and skill-development course.

Another way this course-linking strategy could be used to stretch the depth and breadth of the freshman seminar is to link it with a content-oriented general education course (e.g., History). Students could then apply the strategies and skills presented in the freshman seminar (e.g., note-taking and memory-improvement strategies) to the content covered in the general education course. This form of course-linking would allow students to make immediate use of the learning strategies discussed in the seminar and apply them directly to concurrently experienced courses, thus enhancing the perceived relevance of the course. Also, linking the seminar with a general education course would provide a meaningful context of content within which students can practice effective learning skills. Research indicates that for effective learning skills to "take hold" in students, i.e., to become fully incorporated into their habitual approach to learning, students need to have a sense of purpose for using these skills in relation to a specific task, rather than attempting to develop them in isolated skills-development workshops or "study skills" courses (Gamson, 1993; Weinstein & Underwood, 1985).

Middlesex Community College (NJ) has extended the strategy of course linking by coupling its freshman seminar with two or three other courses to form the following "course clusters": (a)

Liberal Arts cluster (Freshman Seminar + English Composition + Introduction to Psychology), (b) Business cluster (Freshman Seminar + Introduction to Computers + Introduction to Business), and (c) Liberal Studies cluster for developmental students (Basic Writing + Fundamentals of Math + Reading Strategies). Using a "block registration" format, the same cohort of freshmen enroll in all courses that comprise the cluster, thus creating an interdisciplinary "learning community" of first-year students who share a common course schedule (Levitz, 1993).

3. Should the course be required or offered as an elective?

Roughly 60% of all American colleges and universities offer the freshman seminar as an elective course, while about 40% require it for graduation. Two-year colleges are more likely to offer the seminar as an elective (66%) rather than as a graduation requirement (Fidler & Fidler, 1991; Barefoot & Fidler, 1996).

It is recommended that the freshman seminar be offered as a general education requirement. Though this may initially generate more political resistance (Gardner, 1989), and possibly necessitate an increase in the number of units required for graduation or accreditation, these costs should be outweighed by the following benefits:

* Offering the seminar as a general-education requirement will ensure that the course will reach those students who most need it for college survival.

In contrast, offering the seminar as an elective leaves student enrollment to chance or self-selection, which raises the distinct possibility that those who need it the most will opt not to take it. In fact, research strongly suggests that institutions should not offer support services passively, i.e., waiting for students to come and take advantage of them. Instead, institutions should reach out to students and deliver support programs intrusively (Beal & Noel, 1980) because, if left to their own devices, students who need programmatic support will not seek it out on their own (Friedlander, 1980); for example, among students who withdraw from college due to academic difficulties, approximately two out of every three never used the institution's academic support services (Williams, Groninger, & Johnson, cited in Daubman, et al., 1985). This is particularly true for underrepresented students (Richardson, 1987) and commuter students (Chickering, 1974), both of whom are disproportionately enrolled in community colleges (Ambron, 1991).

Offering the freshman seminar as a required course ensures that its benefits are delivered intrusively and systemically so the course can, as prevailing research indicates, "help the talented student perform better while at the same time helping weaker students survive" (Fidler & Hunter, 1989, p. 228). If the course cannot be offered as a requirement, then it should be advertised aggressively during pre-semester orientation or course registration (e.g., via flyer or pamphlets) and promoted

vigorously by academic advisors (particularly for high-risk students).

It is noteworthy that 27% of institutions offering the freshman orientation seminar require it only for high-risk students (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). While this practice is better than offering no seminar at all, it incurs the potential disadvantages of stigmatizing under-prepared students and preventing them from interacting with academically more-qualified freshmen, who serve as academic role models and display effective learning strategies for less-qualified freshmen to emulate. The latter disadvantage may be particularly significant when viewed in light of research which indicates that observing peers succeed at a task can result in a vicarious increase in the observing peers' sense of self-efficacy, resulting in the observers feeling that they can succeed also (Rosenthal & Bandura, 1978).

* Offering the freshman seminar as a general education requirement would provide all first-year students with a common experience in a core course whose content and objectives are consistent with the ideals and mission of the American community college.

The "education-for-life" skills that are emphasized in the freshman seminar dovetail perfectly with the community college tradition of lifelong learning and continuing education.

It is ironic that the goals of general education are person-centered and skill-focused, but its curriculum is content-focused (Palmer, 1982). Offering the freshman seminar as a required course in the general education curriculum would serve to redress some of this imbalance by adding a student-centered, skill-focused course to the curriculum which clearly reflects the person-centered, skill-focused goals of liberal learning. Moreover, the freshman seminar can serve as a core course that simulates, in smaller scale, the advantages associated with a core curriculum, i.e., provide students with a common and central experience which is shared by all learners in the college community.

4. What should be the length or duration of the freshman seminar?

National surveys reveal that freshman seminars vary in length from one-two weeks to as long as two full semesters (Fidler & Fidler, 1991). Given the empirical research indicating greater retention-enhancing effects of longer orientation interventions, plus the fact that greater course length results in more contact time for content coverage, skills development, and social or emotional bonding, it is recommended that the seminar be conducted as a full-semester course. Longer course length may also serve to reduce instructors' overreliance on the lecture method, which may be strongly favored in shorter courses because it is an efficient way to cover more material in less time. Freshman seminars that run for a longer time period, allowing for a greater number of class sessions, may allow instructors to feel more comfortable about spending more class

time on active student-centered learning experiences (e.g., small-group discussion or cooperative learning) which are more time-intensive but more effective for promoting student retention and higher-level thinking skills (Brookfield, 1990; Kurfiss, 1988).

At the very minimum, the seminar should be offered for 7-8 weeks (half term) to provide new students with intrusive support during the critical first 6-8 weeks of their first semester of college life, a period of time when freshmen have been found to be particularly vulnerable to attrition (Blanc, Debuhr, & Martin, 1983).

One strategy for extending the length of the seminar retroactively is to link it with a pre-semester, freshman orientation program. One two-year institution, Marymount College (CA), requires student attendance at its pre-semester orientation program as part of its required first-semester freshman seminar. The pre-semester orientation includes a welcoming ceremony (convocation) for freshmen during which faculty march in full academic regalia and new students are formally welcomed to the college by stepping up on stage to receive a college pin from the president and sign a register, affirming their entry or induction into the community of higher learning. Students then partake in a series of small-group experiences after which they complete reflective "reaction papers" that are counted as completed assignments to be credited toward their freshman seminar course grade (Marymount College, cited in Strumpf & Sharer, 1993).

5. How should the course be graded: With a letter grade affecting the student's grade-point average, or on a pass/fail (credit/no-credit) basis?

At almost 66% of all two-year colleges offering the freshman seminar, students receive a letter grade for the course which is computed in their grade-point average (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996). This practice is recommended for three basic reasons: (a) It ensures the seminar's legitimacy and credibility because most college courses are graded on an A-F basis. (b) A course grade can serve as an incentive, increasing the quantity and intensity of student effort, as well as increasing faculty expectations of student commitment and performance, both of which should serve to increase the seminar's positive impact on student development. (c) There is evidence that students prefer to take the seminar for credit (Carney & Weber, 1987). It is noteworthy that the University of South Carolina's freshman seminar, which has served as a model for freshman-orientation courses nationwide, has recently been changed from a pass-fail to letter-graded course to accommodate student preferences (Berman, 1993).

6. What would be the optimal class size for the freshman seminar?

National surveys reveal that the class size for freshman seminars varies from less than 20 student per class (39%) to more than 40 students per class (11%), with the majority of institutions (63%) offering freshman seminars in class sizes that

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are capped at 25 (Barefoot & Fidler, 1996).

To be true to the name, "seminar," denoting an intimate group or community of active learners, class size should kept as small as possible. Small classes would also facilitate bonding among classmates and better enable the instructor to: (a) establish rapport with individual students, (b) assign more frequent writing, and (c) provide more personalized and prescriptive feedback to students.

Naturally, smaller class sizes may require more course sections, more course instructors, and more money expended. However, this trade-off may be worth making because there is evidence that students in smaller freshman seminar classes, especially those with less than 20 students, perceive the course to be more effective (North Dakota State University, cited in Barefoot, 1993a) and achieve higher first-semester GPAs, relative to students enrolled in larger sections of the course (Hopkins & Hahn, cited in Fidler & Hunter, 1989).

7. Should different sections of the course be offered that are tailored specifically to students with different entry characteristics, academic needs, or educational plans?

No national data have been collected on this issue; however, it is probably the case that most institutions offer the same or very similar course content in all sections of the freshman seminar, while a minority of institutions offer separate sections with distinctively different content for students with differing entry characteristics or educational plans (e.g., special sections for developmental students, honors students, or students in pre-professional programs). For example, Hagerstown Junior College (Maryland) requires a special freshman seminar for all its student athletes (Barefoot, 1993c).

Given the great diversity of students in American community colleges, the issue of whether their differing needs should be accommodated by different seminar sections is a significant one. For instance: Should different seminar sections be offered for adult (re-entry) students and traditional-age students, or for liberal arts (transfer-oriented) students and vocational-oriented students who are seeking a program certificate or associate degree?

The major advantages associated with homogenous grouping of similar students in separate course sections are: (a) It increases the likelihood that students will perceive the freshman seminar as relevant because they will be encountering course topics that more closely match their particular needs or plans, and (b) It enables students who share similar backgrounds and characteristics to cohere into a mutually supportive, self-help group.

The need to homogeneously group adult students in special sections of the freshman seminar is argued forcefully by Steltenpohl and Shipton (1986), freshman seminar instructors at Empire State College, one of the first colleges designed specially for adults,

> Our experiences as faculty members working with adults entering or reentering college convinced us they have special needs that should be addressed so they can successfully make the transition from citizen-in-the-world to college student. The provision of a comprehensive entry course for adult students would aid these students in making a more comfortable and successful transition to college. We are convinced that for maximum effectiveness the course should consist entirely of entry or reentry adults and be the first study in college (pp. 127 & 128).

Patrick Henry Community College (VA) offers a special seminar for single parents which focuses on strategies for managing their multiple-demand roles of parents, school, and work (Barefoot, 1993c). Married re-entry women might also profit from special sections which address adjustment issues that research has shown to be common to them, such as coping with negative reactions from friends or family (Levine, 1976; Swift, Colvin, & Mills, 1987), or for dealing with "role overload" associated with family care and school work (Markus, 1976; Wilkie & Thompson, 1993).

On the other hand, one major drawback associated with homogeneous grouping of students into special sections is that such homogeneity may reduce seminar students' exposure to a broad diversity of perspectives and experiences which is important for developing critical thinking (Kurfiss, 1988), promoting attitude change (Kulik & Kulik, 1979), and appreciating diversity (Worchel, 1979). For example, a diverse class of first-year students can provide a rich context for nurturing students' appreciation of cross-cultural and cross-generational differences. As Helfgot (1986) illustrates,

> The late adolescent who has trouble communicating with parents may find that a classmate who is a peer of his/her parents is easy to talk to, understanding, and open. Conversely, the adult student having trouble understanding children in late adolescence may gain valuable insight, information, and perspective from a fellow student in the same stage as his/her children. . . . Diversity among students must be viewed as a resource, and clear messages must be given to expand, to innovate, and to use the diversity in the student body (pp. 33 & 35)

Community colleges, in particular, may be uniquely positioned to use the freshman seminar to foster appreciation of "cross-aspirational" differences by offering heterogeneous sections of transfer-oriented and vocational-oriented students. Interactions between students who are on these different educational "tracks" may provide them with opportunities to integrate general and specialized education. The reciprocal influence of these two groups might be particularly interesting when viewed in light of research which indicates that the transfer rate of community college students who are in vocational-technical programs now

equals or exceeds that of students who are in general education (transfer-track) programs. This finding may call into question the validity of drawing strong distinctions between community college students as being on "transfer" or "nontransfer" tracks (Prager, 1988), and strongly suggests that first-year students should not be segregated into separate seminar sections on this basis.

One strategy for realizing the advantages of both homogeneous and heterogeneous sections of the freshman seminar is to offer heterogeneous class sections with common content for diverse students, but encourage instructors to periodically place students in homogeneous groups for in-class discussions (e.g., cooperative learning groups) or for out-of-class assignments (e.g., group projects) so that similar subgroups can select, address, and support each other on issues that are relevant to their particular educational needs or college adjustments.

8. Who should teach the course?

National data indicate that faculty most frequently teach the freshman seminar, followed by student affairs personnel (Fidler & Fidler, 1991). Academic support-service providers (e.g., learning center staff) and administrators (e.g., academic dean or college president) have also served as course instructors. At some colleges, academic advisors serve as seminar instructors for class sections comprised of their own freshman advisees.

One advantage of having faculty serve as course instructors is that their involvement should increase the probability that the seminar will be perceived as having academic credibility and centrality to the educational mission of the college. However, given the seminar's non-traditional academic content and its student-centered focus, not all faculty would be equally viable candidates for course instruction. It is recommended that instructor-recruitment efforts be targeted at faculty who possess the following characteristics:
(a) Faculty whose course evaluations and campus reputations suggest that they relate well to students and can create a class climate characterized by a high degree of teacher-student rapport. (b) Faculty who have shown a willingness to experiment with instructional strategies other than the traditional lecture method (e.g., student-centered learning activities that promote active involvement via class discussions and small-group work). (c) Faculty who have had a history of student "advocacy" rather than student "bashing" (e.g., faculty who have high expectations for students and confidence that they will succeed, including first-year students who may initially lack academic preparation or motivation). (d) Faculty who are respected by their peers as effective educators with high academic standards, and by administrators for their history of commitment and service to the college.

Administrators may play a key role in the identification and recruitment of freshman seminar faculty with the foregoing

qualities by encouraging their personal involvement (e.g., via personal note, call, or lunch contact) and by enlisting the support of their department chairs. Involving the most student-centered and committed faculty on campus to serve as freshman seminar instructors would be an administrative practice that effectively implements the National Institute of Education's (1984) principle of "front loading," which calls for reallocation or redistribution of the institutions's best educational resources to serve the critical needs of first-year students.

Teaching teams have also been used in the freshman seminar, including the following team-teaching partnerships: (a) faculty members from different academic disciplines, (b) veteran faculty member (mentor) with a new faculty member (protegee), (c) faculty and student affairs professionals, (d) faculty and academic support-service professionals, (e) faculty and academic administrators, and (f) faculty and students (e.g., graduate student, upper-division undergraduate student, or college sophomore).

These types of team-teaching partnerships are highly recommended because they can be used to bring together members from different functional units of the college to pursue a common cause. This serves to promote campus collegiality, a sense of college community, and increases campus-wide ownership of the freshman seminar as well as college-wide consciousness of its value. Even inter-institutional or intersegmental teaching teams have been utilized, whereby faculty from two-year and four-year institutions join forces to teach an orientation course, with the objective of promoting cross-college collaboration and successful student transfer (Donovan & Schaier-Peleg, 1988).

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